

One-to-One vs. Two-to-One Instruction: A Response to Iversen, Tunmer, and Chapman (2005)

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An article appeared in fall 2005 issue of the *Journal of Learning Disabilities* which claims to compare teaching in pairs to one-to-one teaching using a “Reading Recovery approach” (Iversen, Tunmer, & Chapman, 2005). The intent of the study reported in the article was to show that Reading Recovery could be taught to two children at the same time—rather than to children individually—with similar results. In point of fact, the teaching reported in this article was not Reading Recovery. Their study compared the teaching of individuals to the teaching of pairs using a program loosely adapted from the Reading Recovery lesson framework. Their study offers no evidence that Reading Recovery can be taught to children in pairs or in small groups. Reading Recovery is a trademarked, one-to-one, early literacy intervention with a specific theory and an instructional approach, teacher training model, and student selection process based upon that theory. Following are some major differences between their intervention and Reading Recovery.

1. The study reported in the article by Iversen, Tunmer, & Chapman is based upon theory that is different from Reading Recovery theory. These authors argue that since young children struggling to learn literacy all lack decoding ability, they can all benefit from a curriculum that begins with and emphasizes decoding. Such a curriculum was delivered to children in the Iversen study, both to those taught in pairs and those taught one-to-one. This is an approach based on a deficit model—teaching children by beginning with what they are assumed to lack.

These authors also misrepresent Reading Recovery as teaching children to guess words by using context and picture clues rather than learning to decode. On the contrary, learning to use phonics knowledge to solve words in reading and writing is a goal of Reading Recovery. As they begin Reading Recovery lessons, children do use story meanings, picture support, and their strengths in oral language to help them read unfamiliar words in texts. But they learn more about letters, sounds, and words in each lesson, and they learn early on to check their reading responses against the letters and words on the page. By the end of their

series of lessons, children understand phonics and can decode words and spell words as well as or better than most first-grade children. This approach makes it much easier for children to learn and builds upon strengths each individual child brings to his or her lessons. Building on a student’s strengths is a basic principle of Reading Recovery instruction.

2. The groups of students in the Iversen study were substantially different from children served by Reading Recovery. Their entering scores were significantly higher than scores for children entering Reading Recovery. On the text reading measure, for example, the mean for the children in the Iversen study was about two standard deviations above the national Reading Recovery pretreatment mean, and pretreatment means for two other Observation Survey tasks used by Iversen were at least one standard deviation above the mean for the national population of Reading Recovery children.

These differences undoubtedly result from screening and selection processes that deviated from Reading Recovery standards. Initial screening utilized only two Observation Survey tasks (Letter Identification and Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words). Final selection was based upon additional phonological and decoding tasks as well as other Observation Survey tasks. However, no explanation is given for the selection procedures used, and there appear to have been significant exclusions, not all of which are defensible on the basis of Reading Recovery standards (for example, excluding children with very low scores).

3. Although the lesson framework used by Iversen, Tunmer, and Chapman was loosely based upon Reading Recovery, there were significant differences in the teaching of students. Much more attention was given to word learning, decoding, and word analogy training in isolation through the addition or alteration of lesson segments. In Reading Recovery, word and letter learning does occur in isolation, but the emphasis is on learning information within the context where it is applied. What guides Reading Recovery teaching is the child’s developing ability to recognize and read words and use letter-sound information while reading continuous text for meaning and while writing stories.

The emphasis in Reading Recovery teaching is on something larger and more inclusive—the child’s acquisition of a system of operations while reading and writing text. Rapidly increasing knowledge of letters, words, and sounds is both a contributor to and an outcome of a child’s strategic activity in both reading and writing.

4. The training of teachers in the Iversen study was not comparable to Reading Recovery training. The teachers in the Iversen study taught only one child individually during their training, which lasted only about 3 months. Reading Recovery training is delivered over the period of a year. During this time teachers work with at least four children daily (around 8 to 12 children over the course of a year) in Reading Recovery lessons, and they meet weekly to discuss lessons taught behind a one-way glass and co-construct their understandings of literacy acquisition and literacy instruction under the leadership of a Reading Recovery-trained leader.

The teachers in the Iversen study were not officially part of the Reading Recovery network. They did not meet the standards and guidelines of Reading Recovery and were not certified in Reading Recovery. They taught just one child individually and one pair of children each day during their training. Not only did they receive a much shorter training series and teach many fewer children, but their training sessions also included significant time focused on techniques and issues concerning the teaching of children in pairs. The amount of time and attention focused on how to adjust instruction to the particular strengths and needs of individual students was in no way comparable to Reading Recovery training.

The children in the Iversen study made adequate progress during their period of the study, which testifies to the power of the Reading Recovery lesson framework and benefits of increased instructional attention given to low-average children. However, there appears to have been no acceleration of the children taught one-to-one—a result which would have been expected had these children been taught in a certifiable Reading Recovery program. And the hypothesis that the very lowest children in a cohort are able to accelerate learning when taught in pairs was certainly not tested.

Summary

Reading Recovery cannot be done in groups of two or more. Reading Recovery is a way to begin and then

accelerate a learning process for individual children who enter their second year of schooling with the very lowest literacy knowledge and progress. Reading Recovery’s effectiveness depends upon teacher skill, understanding, careful observation, and continual re-examination and reflection. Reading Recovery leaders recognize, however, that many children who need a boost in reading and writing can learn in dyads or even small-group situations. In fact, Reading Recovery is intended to be just one part of a comprehensive framework for literacy development that includes classroom, small-group learning, one-to-one teaching for the lowest performing children, and special educational services for children with exceptional needs.

A substantial body of research evidence supports the effectiveness of Reading Recovery in bringing the majority of children served to learning levels for continued adequate (at least) learning progress through their elementary school years. There will always be children taught in Reading Recovery who will need the services of special education professionals (just as there will always be some former Reading Recovery children who become honor students). However, the numbers of special education students will be reduced and their identification will be more efficient and more reliable following a full series of Reading Recovery lessons. There is very considerable data and documented experience in Reading Recovery showing that the children in the lowest quintile need that individual teaching.

The study by Iversen and her colleagues should not be viewed as evidence that Reading Recovery can be taught in dyads or pairs or that the model used in this study would be as effective as Reading Recovery for the most at-risk students because in fact, Reading Recovery was not tested in the experiment. Administrators, researchers, and others concerned with early literacy acquisition should be aware that conclusions drawn by Iversen, Tunmer, and Chapman are based on comparisons that do not incorporate the high quality professional development and effective individual instruction tied to the Reading Recovery intervention.

References

- Iversen, S., Tunmer, W., & Chapman, J. (2005). The effects of varying group size on the Reading Recovery approach to preventive early intervention. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 38*(5), 256–272.